



National Association for Uniformed Services

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The Servicemember's Voice in Government

Established in 1968



**Statement of The National Association for Uniformed Services (NAUS)
on H.R. 23, The Belated Thank You to WWII Merchant Mariners
Wednesday, April 18, 2007
Cannon House Office Building**

Chairman Filner, Ranking Member Buyer, and members of the Committee:

On behalf of the nationwide membership of the National Association for Uniformed Services (NAUS), I am pleased to present our views on H.R. 23, the Belated Thank You to Merchant Mariners of World War II Act of 2007. We appreciate the opportunity to submit a statement concerning one of the injustices done to a group of men—the World War II Merchant Mariners—who bravely and honorably gave wartime service to their country.

NAUS commends you for your strength of leadership in recognition of heroic service put forth during World War II by the thousands of young men who volunteered for service in the United States Merchant Marine. These forgotten heroes have struggled for more than six decades for acceptance among their military brethren and the public. And it is unthinkable that these brave men should be given a cold shoulder by the nation they proudly served.

H.R. 23, the Belated Thank You to Merchant Mariners of World War II Act of 2007, would recognize the contribution made by the men and women who served in the United States Merchant Marine in World War II between the years 1941 and 1946. It would also provide a compensation of \$1,000 per month to balance a lifetime of ineligibility for veterans' benefits and provide those few surviving World War II mariners, whose average age today is 83, the status of "veteran" under the Social Security Act to give a small enhancement of that retirement benefit.

Let us review a bit of history.

In 1936, Franklin Roosevelt, the thirty-second President of the United States, urged Congress to pass the Merchant Marine Act to man and establish a shipping capability to be used for commerce during peacetime and converted for use by the Navy during wartime or national emergency.

In a 1935 letter to Congress, Roosevelt wrote, "... in the event of a major war in which the United States itself might be engaged, American flag ships are obviously needed not only for naval auxiliaries, but also for the maintenance of reasonable and necessary commercial intercourse with other nations. We should remember lessons learned in the last war."

In this congressional message the President further stated, "If we are going to keep away from our shores the forces that have convulsed the Old World and now menace the New, the job will be done in large measure by the ships and the sailors of the Merchant Marine and by the working

men who build the ships and supply them. If they fail, the whole effort fails. And earnest, hardworking Americans, who spend the best part of their lives providing for the security and happiness of those they love, know that precious security and happiness depend exactly on the success of that effort.”

Passage of this Act proved prescient when in 1939 war broke out in Europe and American interests were threatened.

With American entrance into the war on the horizon, President Roosevelt told the American people in 1941, “Today, as never before in our history, our Merchant Marine is vital to our national welfare. I do not mean vital merely in the conventional sense that it makes an important contribution but in the stronger sense that it is a crucially decisive factor in our continued existence as a free people.”

Immediately after Pearl Harbor, Merchant Marine activity was needed to carry out lend-lease to Britain, to fulfill the terms of the First Moscow Protocol, to move troops and supplies to all theaters of war, and to ship petroleum. In order to meet the worldwide needs for shipping, it became necessary to coordinate the existing private shipping facilities and to centralize Federal control over merchant shipping.

The merchant fleet helped build up in the British Isles a tremendous arsenal of supplies during 1943 and early 1944 in preparation for the invasion of Europe. Huge convoys, some with as many as 167 ships, delivered the troops and supplies in shuttle service across the Atlantic. The invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944, was the greatest sea-borne invasion in history. At its head were 32 American merchant ships, many of which had previously suffered severe battle damage. These 32 ships were charged with explosives and were sunk off the beachhead in order to form a breakwater for subsequent landing of supplies. Following this, 10 oceangoing tugboats, operated by the Merchant Marine, towed the famous artificial ports into position, thereby making possible the quick landing of tanks, guns, supplies, and heavy equipment necessary to hold and expand the beachhead.

Under the Merchant Marine Act and in a five-year period from 1941 to 1946, America built nearly 3,000 Liberty Ships—emergency steel cargo vessels with a cargo capacity of approximately 10,000 dead-weight tons each—and the number of mariners grew from 55,000 to between 215,000 and 250,000 mariners and seamen.

In effect, these men and their ships were responsible for transporting the vast majority of overseas military cargo, including military and civilian personnel and supplies, to war zone destinations.

Many of these mariners were recruited specifically to staff ships under the control and direction of the United States Government to assist the World War II effort. These seamen were subject to government control; their vessels were controlled by the government under the authority of the War Shipping Administration and, like other branches of military service, they traveled under sealed orders and were subject to the Code of Military Justice.

Some volunteers joined the Merchant Marine because minor physical problems, such as poor eyesight, made them ineligible for regular service in the Army, Navy, or Marine Corps. Others were encouraged by military recruiters to volunteer for service in the Merchant Marine because the special skills offered by these volunteers could best be put to use for our country by service in the Merchant Marine. Most important, all were motivated by their deep love of country and personal sense of patriotism to contribute to the war effort.

The wartime movement of supplies and the troops was much more than a simple ocean cruise. It was hard work and dangerous.

Members of the Merchant Marine served on ships that engaged the enemy, lost their ships because of enemy action, were physically wounded or disabled as a result of enemy action, became prisoners of war, and served in combat and war zones under threat of attack by enemy air or submarine.

And a cadre of American merchant seamen participated in a number of perilous World War II invasions, including the invasions of Normandy, Sicily and the Philippines.

As members of the Committee know, the Atlantic Ocean was alive with German submarines at the start of the war, traveling in "wolf packs," ready to sink transport of critical supplies of oil, raw materials and food to England and Russia.

Early in the war, German U-boats sank two of every 12 ships that left U.S. ports. In 1942, losses to the merchant fleet equaled 39 percent of new ship construction in that year. With more successful counter to enemy submarines, this ratio was reduced to 11 percent in 1943, to less than 8 percent in 1944, and to only 4 percent in 1945.

During the war period, it is reported that more than 8,000 merchant seamen lost their lives or were declared missing in action, and an additional 609 merchant seamen became prisoners of war. An estimated 731 vessels were sunk with another 40 ships and crews lost without a trace.

At the conclusion of the war, Merchant Marine vessels played another important role returning home the huge number of armed personnel from overseas. Over 3,500,000 men were brought home from overseas areas. And after the war ended, they carried food and medicine to millions of the world's starving people.

Regarding the service of the Merchant Marine, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, on National Maritime Day, 1945, said, "The officers and men of the Merchant Marine, by their devotion to duty in the face of enemy action, as well as natural dangers of the sea, have brought us the tools to finish the job. Their contribution to final victory will be long remembered."

And in the Pacific theatre, Gen. Douglas MacArthur said, "I wish to commend to you the valor of the merchant seamen participating with us in the liberation of the Philippines. With us they have shared the heaviest enemy fire. On this island I have ordered them off their ships and into foxholes when their ships became untenable targets of attack. At our side they have suffered in bloodshed and in death. The caliber of efficiency and the courage they displayed in their part of

the invasion of the Philippines marked their conduct throughout the entire campaign in the southwest Pacific area. They have contributed tremendously to our success. I hold no branch in higher esteem than the Merchant Marine services."

Mr. Chairman, the National Association for Uniformed Services believes that it is now time for the United States to recognize properly these individuals for their exceptional contribution and strength of effort. They helped preserve the freedoms we enjoy today.

We ask Congress to support those now almost-ancient mariners whose heroic contribution as members of the ocean-going Merchant Mariners struggled to help secure the American victory in World War II. On behalf of a grateful nation, we urge you to extend these benefits to those once young men who went to sea as crewmembers of the Merchant Marine during World War II.

We note that Canada recently approved a tax-free compensation package for its Merchant Navy veterans and surviving spouses. Our northern neighbor provides between \$5,000 and \$24,000 in lump-sum payments to eligible Canadian mariners who served during the First and Second World Wars and the Korean War.

Mr. Chairman, we thank you and the members of this Committee for the progress you are making, and we look forward to working with you to ensure that a grateful nation will protect, strengthen, and improve veterans' benefits and services.

Again, NAUS appreciates the opportunity to present a statement on this matter.

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